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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that reading comprehension is the interaction of the reader's knowledge of the topic and the language with the writer's choice of content and use of the language. Classroom activities based on this research can lead to foreign language learners' successful construction of meaning from a written passage through oral and written communication activities. Pre-reading activities build new knowledge or activate existing background knowledge of the content of the reading passage, involving interaction with either the topic or the language of the text. Varied techniques also actively engage students with the text while reading. Post-reading activities help students to think about what they have read. Through these activities, readers discover what they understand and how the writer understands his or her own production. Contains 15 references. (Author)

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TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION

THROUGH CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

Recent research indicates that reading comprehension is the interaction of the reader's knowledge of the topic and the language with the writer's choice of content and use of the language. Classroom activities based on this research can lead to foreign language learners' successful construction of meaning from a written passage through oral and written communication activities. Pre-reading activities build new knowledge or activate existing background knowledge of the content of the reading passage, involving interaction with either the topic or the language of the text. Varied techniques also actively engage students with the text while reading. Post-reading activities help students to think about what they have read. Through these activities, readers discover what they understand and how the writer understands his own production.

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The interactive model of reading comprehension is based on the theory of a reader's "top-down" and "bottom-up" processing of a text for comprehension (Rumelhart, 1977). In top-down processing, readers rely on their background knowledge or experience in the world to infer meaning. In bottom-up processing, readers rely on their knowledge of the language to integrate textual elements for meaning. As neither the full picture of events nor all the explicit relations between language elements is given in a text, top-down and bottom-up processing must take place for construction of meaning for comprehension of a reading passage. This theoretical model offers the possibility of effective approaches for teaching reading comprehension skills to foreign language learners.

Readers are able to comprehend more naturally when they read to construct their own meaning for a passage rather than answer single answer/multiple choice questions. Such textbook questions or teacher-led discussions often demand exclusive memory searching. Thus, questions and discussions designed to aid comprehension may actually limit it, interfering with normal reading strategies. However, an effective teacher can guide comprehension by organizing activities in which students themselves are able independently to construct meaning through effective top-down and bottom-up processing of the text.

Pre-reading activities not only stimulate interest but also build new knowledge and/or activate existing background knowledge on the topic of the reading passage. Skimming for the general idea or scanning to find specific information in the passage before reading results in effective top-down processing of the text later while reading. Students can describe or write about a graph or a picture which may accompany a reading passage, relating the topic of the passage to their own personal lives. If the topic of the passage is travel, students can write about a similar travel experience.

Other activities for effective top-down processing of a text

are based on techniques which elicit predictions of the content of the passage before reading. Students can use their imaginations to write questions on the topic, the theme, the title, one or two key concepts, the first sentence or a phrase from the passage. Or they can write about their reaction to any of the preceding and identify why they had this reaction. This writing, which takes place during 10-15 minutes in class, does not focus on writing mechanics but gives priority to idea development for activating and building background knowledge. Then, in pairs or triads, they can compare and discuss their written predictions, questions, reactions, in order to share and build background knowledge. The teacher can move around the groups and discuss expectations for the content of the passage with individuals and later with the entire class. After reading the passage, students can refer to the text to answer their pre-reading questions or to compare the reading passage with what they had predicted as content before reading.

"Semantic mapping", a technique to teach vocabulary before reading the passage, can activate and build background knowledge for effective bottom-up processing of a text. Students brainstorm verbally all the vocabulary associations that they have with the topic or the key concept of the reading passage. These associated words are categorized in groups of collocations in the form of a visual display. Not only can key vocabulary from the passage be introduced or reviewed but also cultural and emotional ties related to particular social customs referred to in the passage can be discussed for effective top-down processing. After reading the passage, students can expand the semantic map with facts from the reading passage.

Another pre-reading activity to promote effective bottom-up processing is the selection from the reading passage of sentences that contain words with meanings which can be derived from context. A blank is put in place of this word or expression; for example, "He shot the mule to _____". Students choose words for the blank, guessing the meaning from the semantic clue "shot"

before actually seeing the expression, "kingdom come", in context. Then, an in-class comparison is made of students' different answers with the original idiomatic expression. s ignificant problems for later bottom-up processing of the story can thus be anticipated.

While reading a passage, readers recall information from class discussions and their own personal experiences to select, relate, and interpret relevant ideas. In extensive assigned reading, journal writing helps students to examine their own evolving interpretation of a passage for effective top-down processing of a text. Students can be asked to write about the central idea perceived in the passage, how they feel about it, and their associations of new information with previous knowledge and beliefs for effective top-down processing. Students can write a personal response or a question to the theme or plot, make a brief character analysis, or discuss the effects of the setting on a character or the point of view of the author or one of the characters as they read. Students can be encouraged to write whatever comes to their minds, even if unrelated to the original text. For effective bottom-up processing, students can be asked to select and quote details in the passage to support ideas written in their journals. Teachers can write comments in the journals about the text in their response to students' reactions. Besides journal writing, another assignment for extensive reading is to ask students to review a book, after showing them book reviews published in journals. The students' reviews can be distributed to the others who can then decide if they are interested in reading the book.

For effective top-down processing of a narrative passage read outside of class, students can be asked to identify main characters or the climax. Students cam also be asked to identify different sets or scenes which could be used to film a story. As a follow-up in class for both of these activities, students must look closely at the text to resolve conflicting opinions for effective bottom-up processing. Students can also be asked to

construct time lines, listing significant events in chronological sequence on the line, citing references from the text. In the following in-class discussion, groups or pairs of students are assigned portions of the passage, each containing one or two significant events. Then, the whole class can collaborate on one time line, possibly drawing cause/effect arrows between events.

For effective top-down processing of an expository passage, students can be asked to choose, before class, the line from the passage which expresses the central idea or thesis. This is followed by a discussion of reasons for this choice with reference to the passage. Or students can be asked to list a topic for each paragraph outside of class. Then, students meet in groups/pairs in class to develop a written statement about the passage, incorporating at least two of the elicited topics. Each group reads the statement to the class for discussion and evaluation, especially in terms of textual support for effective bottom-up processing.

An expository passage can be divided into sections. Students give a name, a word or a phrase that reveals the writer's purpose for each section for effective top-down processing. Students discuss the contribution of each section to the passage as a whole in terms of the names provided for each section. In this activity, students become involved with organizational problems. Thus, they develop a strategy to analyze organization in their own essays: to explain the function of each paragraph in relation to their purpose for writing.

In the preceding activities for top-down processing while reading, students must rely on bottom-up processing of the text to support generalizations that they or others have made. There are also other activities for effective bottom-up processing. Students can be asked to write questions as they do assigned reading or as they read the first section of a passage silently in class. They are thus forced to look closely at the passage, improving comprehension and involving themselves with meaning in the text. Later, while asking each other these reader-generated

questions in pairs or small groups, students refer to the passage in cases of disagreement of reference or misunderstanding of meaning. Students' question asking skills improve, especially when asking questions which demand inference and synthesis of ideas in the passage. Students can also be asked to distinguish fact from opinion expressed in statements taken directly from the passage. Later, they can compare responses in groups of two or three and defend their choice, supporting their arguments with lines from the text.

In all of these activities, writing is as important as discussion for comprehension of a reading passage. When students write, they must depend on their own powers of analysis. Confidence in using their own experience and knowledge is developed for top-down and bottom-up processing of what they read and can result in better comprehension and subsequent discussion.

Roleplays and problem solving activities ask students to work through comprehension after reading. To ensure the interaction of two cultures, the one in the passage and the background of the readers, students can discuss the question of whether or not the events in a narrative could have taken place in their culture or if the topic of an expository passage is relevant to their culture. Students can also rewrite or retell a particular situation or issue from the perspective of a character in a narrative, taking into consideration the characters' feelings, ideas, and style of speech. Or they can write or roleplay conversations between the characters of a story, play, or poem. Scenes suggested in a narrative but not explicitly given can be role played. Or students can role play what they would have done if something similar had happened to them.

Ranking textual elements (activities, events, or states) according to importance as indicated by the writer's linguistic cues forces students to really think about what they have read for bottom-up processing. In addition, this problem solving activity requires top-down processing of narrative or expository texts as readers evaluate the importance of linguistic items for

the construction of meaning for a text. Principal and subordinate ideas can be organized in a visual display (maps, flowcharts, timelines), according to individual ranking of items in the passage. These visual displays are later defended and synthesized in small group discussions in class. Students' summaries of reading passages after such mapping activities also seem to result in better paraphrase because of better comprehension of the passage than summaries written without this mapping experience.

These communication activities for effective reading comprehension not only increase communicative competence and language acquisition but also involve the thinking processes that ensure comprehension. Instead of imposing their own culturally determined values and beliefs on the meaning of the text, students learn to independently discover how writers understand their own productions a reading passage through effective interaction with the written text.

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